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Willard Gingerich
gingerichw@montclair.edu

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Armand Schwerner: An interview

Gingerich, Willard . The American Poetry Review ; Philadelphia Vol. 24, Iss. 5, (Sep 1995): 27.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

In an interview, writer and educator Armand Schwerner discusses his recent and earlier Tablets, the creation of the icons in them, and his Scholar/Translator. Schwerner projects another 21 Tablets.

FULL TEXT

Willard Gingerich: Your recent Tablets cover some thirty or more pages, ten times the length of most of their predecessors. They now include your computer-generated graphics--conceived through two desktop programs, ReadySetGo and later Quark Express--and pictographic icons made through the use of font-generating software, Fontastic and Fontographer. Let me ask you to talk a little bit about these icons and fonts, which figure importantly in Tablets XXVI and XXVII, both of which were published recently in CONJUNCTIONS. I was particularly interested, by the way, in the problems of the nature of story and sequence, syntax of events, in Tablet XXVII, in which the Scholar/Translator presents as quasi-narratives the apparently disparate materials found on a number of Akkadian clay cylinder-seals.

Armand Schwerner: I now have a Mac IIsi, as well as a Powerbook 180, and it's possible to replicate, to present, the original languages of the Tablets, which I couldn't do before, when all I could do was to present the Scholar/Translator's versions of the originals. Now it is possible for the Scholar/Translator, since he seems to have the technology, to present some of the Ur-languages themselves. For instance, when I started using a font-generating program, Fontastic Plus, I made two kinds of icon fonts, one basically copied from pre-Sumerian pictographs, the second a series of invented closely related forms. Let me show you some examples from Tablet XXVI. Later on we'll get to a few examples of different icons from Tablet XXVII. The pictographs constitute parts of expressions which the Scholar/Translator reveals and translates; for instance:

(symbol omitted) woman

(symbol omitted) slave (woman + mountain)

(symbol omitted) mountain

(symbol omitted) water

(symbol omitted) head

(symbol omitted) mouth

(symbol omitted) penis/to stand

(symbol omitted) constellation/god/star

(symbol omitted) morning

(symbol omitted) field

(symbol omitted) head

(symbol omitted) a special Mind/Texture/Determinative-Blocker which undoes any expression which precedes it

(symbol omitted) childbirth

(symbol omitted) hand

(symbol omitted) house; then there are invented forms like:

(symbol omitted) SPHARAGRAM OF TRANSFORMATION,

(symbol omitted) SPHARAGRAM OF EGOCENTRIC DEMANDINGNESS,

(symbol omitted) SPHARAGRAM OF STASIS; SYMMETRY; LOSS OF ENERGY; DEATH,

(symbol omitted) SPHARAGRAM OF AMBIGUITY,

(symbol omitted) DEMONIZING PSEUDO-SPHARAGRAM and so forth.

W.G.: What I want to ask is: Can you describe briefly the genesis of the creations of these icons? Can they be admitted as created, from outside of the presented materials? Or does such an admission violate a rule which the constraining givens of your fiction require?

Schwerner: In the first Tablet, in the middle sixties, the Scholar/Translator in one of his annotations interpolated a little picture which was either like a vulva with some symmetrically arranged hair around it, or like a crab, or perhaps a diminutive mop or something. And he...it's there, in the very first Tablet, I.

W.G.: O yes the little spider...

Schwerner: A little spider. So that was hand-drawn, and then it was somehow stylized in the printing process. I always experienced this disjunction between the ways I drew some of the earlier things, like the fractured Tablets—I had broken lines between the segments, which I had drawn by hand—and their stylization by the printer and I didn't really have any part in that. Now it's possible for me to take a direct hand, since we're at a different phase of the cottage industry which is the Macintosh technology, which doesn't do anything new, but which really does extend the possibilities implicit in the original conception, an extension I wouldn't have had any idea about in 1987. The oldest modality through the newest technology. Anyway, so he did that in Tablet I, the little slight intrusive bit of semi-hieroglyphic icon, and then he dropped it. He didn't do that any more. Now he got hold of a computer, I assume. Actually what happened was that he discovered ways to present material which before he had not been willing or able to present. Now I'm not trying to do an end run around your question. A better and more honestly

relevant answer would be something like this: the Tablets on a certain level is a kind of covert autobiography and it's very clear that some critics have been able to trace that the earlier Tablets were redolent of a certain kind of barbaric, heavily phallic psychosexuality, a certain kind of confusion, a certain kind of plaint, a certain kind of need, a certain kind of intensity, perhaps dramatic comedic proto-violent desires and so on. And along about Tablet XII, XIII, XIV, something occurred in both myself and in the poem and there was some kind of a change, as there often is as a man grows older. In Tablet XIII, for instance, in which the major, as usual anonymous, voice was originally that of an imaginatively deranged man, I decided, almost in a kind of trance, to have the Scholar/Translator identify the speaker as a "cured" female psychotic, and all the while I was keeping to the masculine gender allusions in the main voice.

We change, or at least we manifest differently. And all of these changes manifest differently in the work. So since the work is coterminous with my life, and I have no problem asserting that, or admitting that, that there's a parallelism that cannot be figured out ahead of time because it is in fact processual. It's something you can't practice for, you can't have a program for. I only have one program for this work and I'll tell you about that later, and it's actually printed on a piece of paper, it's a late development. The coming-into-being of the computer-generated images has to do with what is available at this time in the same sense that fashion always dictates to some degree the possibilities of a poetics in any art. It is a real level. I have no contempt for it. I embrace it if it seems to be part of what Robert Duncan called the exercise of one's faculties at large. So in that sense there's a coterminousness having to do with the presence of the possibility of the creation and dissemination of the energies as the original layer of what wasn't possible earlier on. I guess what I could have done in the early history of the Tablets is what Mary Ellen Solt and a lot of the visual poets did; what I understand is that some of them made rough versions of some concrete poems, gave them to a printer, or a designer or an illustrator, and that person stylized them and printed them in a magazine or a boob.

W.G.: What I want to ask to start with was how the actual research into the Akkadian and the Sumerian got started and what you actually made use of in the process of inventing Tablet writing systems. You say you did a good bit of research.

Schwerner: Yes. What happened some five years ago, let's see this is 1993, about 1988 or so it wasn't clear to me what I was going to be doing after Tablet XXV and I got a combination of confused, depressed, and irritated, which is always I guess a useful triad, the three legged stool implying the next phase. I guess I started out on a path which afterwards seemed to me a little bit parallel to what a historical novelist does. If he knows he's going to be writing about the beginning of American history he starts to do all kinds of reading in seventeenth and eighteenth century mores and history and stuff on public figures and so on. But I didn't have a program about it. I just started reading in linguistics and . . . one of the important things was the discovery of Denise Schmandt-Besserat's early monographs, put out by Urdena publications, little monographs that I got from Eisenbraun's, a recondite publisher/distributor in the midwest, and that was very exciting because I blundered as it were upon these specialized scholarly materials. The University of Texas has now published

big beautiful edition of her writings, with a foreword by William Hallo, who teaches Assyriology at Yale. So her writings about the ninth millennium B.C. tokens, which thence slowly developed into items related to some kind of cuneiform writings systems, were very exciting because they had to do with the relationship between pictures and language. I guess what was very much on my mind, and I talked about this to my friend Lou Nordstrom, who is a Zen priest, who's also a Western-trained philosopher, had to do with my appetite you could say, (well appetite implies choice, maybe I should say my hunger) hunger for the achievement or at least the relation to an unmediated presence which you can't get with a syllabary or an alphabet.

W.G.: Presence of what?

Schwerner: Sensation more fundamental than perception. Presence of an unmediated experience, which is always at a second or third or fourth remove when you're dealing with some kind of stylized writing system, whereas with image there is the sense that you can be the image, that it's a more sensate unmediated experience, which I think is always part of the profound seductive attractiveness of image and the fact that alphabet is always this incredibly powerful and flat transparent technical means.

W.G.: But I'm not sure I understand what you mean: you can "become the image." Why does the visual medium make that possibility any more compelling or immediate than the verbal image?

Schwerner: I don't think there is a verbal image. I mean there's no alphabetic

image. The nearest thing I know to that is that comment by Dr. Elise Snyder, to the effect that she used to have the sense that certain letters had smiles on them when she was a little girl. But that may be as far as you can get to calligraphic properties of alphabetic units. So you can't have a calligraphic reality and you can't have a pictorially representational reality in the alphabet or the syllabary.

W.G.: But isn't the apprehension of a visual image, or an iconographic image, as intellectual as the apprehension of a written image through words?

Schwerner: I don't think so. I think sensation is more directly involved in one's relationship to image and picture than it is to the abstract symbolization of phonic value, sonic value. Now this doesn't mean that this is true sub specie aeternitatis, because you're going to get philosophers of language and vision thinking different ways on this, but for me it's true, or at least it was true; I still have a very deep sense that there's a greater unmediated closeness between self and picture than there is between self and alphabetic representation of sound.

W.G.: So in some degree then the atavistic attractiveness or the atavistic impulse in the urge toward icon that you are now working out, or that you've been working out in some of the later Tablets, is a sense of this search for an unmediated sensibility that would rest at the origin of what exactly?

Schwerner: A kind of maybe, sort of unexamined feeling at the beginning. I suppose that when you finally go back to the base for your conviction, you get to some kind of assumption, which is automatically wrong of course because it's an assumption, that is to say a conceptualization. In Zen we say: All concepts are misconceptions, all conceptions are misconceptions.

W.G.: I don't want to get too far away from the poetry, but why are they misconceptions exactly?

Schwerner: Because they're conceptions.

W.G.: Because the very act of conceiving is error?

Schwerner:....is error, is a kind of take on reality, is not reality.

W.G.: Well then that gives me a question about the Tablets which may or may not make any sense. The urge to find the very original point, as it were, where sensibility comes into civilization seems to me a hypothetical search which goes on in the S/T's activity.

Is that a search for the point where conception comes into error, and the closer one can come to the actual icon and the iconization of thought, the closer one might come to that threshold beyond which non-error lies?

The S/T wants to find the source of thought and speech, the very place where they come into being, a place where sensibility comes into concept, and thus into error.

Schwerner: Well there are two dimensions to his greed. One is proximate and the other one very far away. He talks occasionally about going back to paleolithic situations; he hasn't done so yet. So he's really staying in a near-Neolithic time-frame. And the furthest he's really going back in terms of real notations or at least his sense of real notations is about say very late Neolithic or early...say around 4000 B.C. or 4500 B.C. or something of that sort.

So in that context there's a tipoff about his greed or the nature of what might be either invention or desire, which are akin. In his divagations on the alphabet...he hates the alphabet with a passion that he doesn't betray for anything else.

And the reason he hates the alphabet has to do with a kind of unending hunger for something more immediate, for some kind of indissoluble union of the thingness of the thing as apprehended through the sense more directly and the representation of the thing. I think this is a very old desire, philosophically and so on.

It has its connections to contemporary phenomenology, you know, the idea that—I know this is two-dimensional but in a way if you say that between Heraclitus and Heidegger everything went downhill—in a sense he would be a representative of that conviction.

W.G.: OK. Which is to accept Heidegger's interpretation of what the history of philosophy may be or may lead to. So in that sense the SIT is Heideggerian?

Schwerner: I don't know. I don't know how well read I am in phenomenology to be able to say that. But I think that this S/T's need or desire or hunger exists through a very deep wish that the thing and the way the thing is represented be as close to each other as possible.

W.G.: Are any part of that desire and any part of that hunger the sense of the thing's desire to be expressed?

Schwerner: Yes. He speaks at one point of Rilke, and I think he connects Rilke's angel with Rilke's definition of that angel "looking into itself," as it were, and I think that he means by that to allude to Rilke's references to the desire of the things of the world to express themselves. So my sense is that he's very interested in the nature of possible consciousness in thing, which relates to his need for the closest possible association between thing and its representation.

W.G.: And is ego a problem and a distraction for him then?

Schwerner: He never says that. He's too Western and he's too sharp and he's too scientific. He's always skewed between his scientific training, his desire for objectification, and parts of his sympathies, which are not clearly available to his consciousness, but which are in a kind of endless pre-conscious colloquy always informing the somewhat confusing texture of his speculations.

W.G.: And to what degree does his desire to articulate the things which are in literal terms his seals and his tokens

and his icons, to what degree does that desire interact with his own system of decipherment? And I have in mind here the system of terminologies that he erects and invents the Mind/Texture/Determinatives, the...

Schwerner: Well now you can't say that he invents them. That's your interpretation of his formulation. So you're saying that he's a liar.

W.G.: No, I'm saying that he's a scholar who has to construct grids of interpretation in order to make sense for himself of those . .

Schwerner: But you're saying that he invented those terms and I don't think that he would agree with you.

W.G.: OK. Well where do they come from? Certainly the original speaker, the Ur-Aryan as he refers to the "blind artificer" in Tablet XXVI, who created the Tablets didn't invent them. Aren't they part of his scholarly apparatus for understanding those Tablets?

Schwerner: You mean that he formulated a category rather than invented the terms. He found the categories by examining the language and then he articulated certain names for the categories which he thought would be helpful.

W.G.: That's my meaning of invent, yes, as a scholar invents, invents terminologies for what is already there.

Schwerner: I think it's maybe not exactly the word he would appreciate.

W.G.: Articulates, then, the inherent structures.

Schwerner: He wouldn't appreciate it because as he indicated in the course of his earlier work, he's already upset by the degree to which he thinks that he might in fact be inventing some of this material. That's his word. And so I think he would be very sensitive to the overtones... he makes a statement around Tablet VII or VIII...

W.G.: "I may be inventing..." yes.

Schwerner: So I think he would be very sensitive to...

W.G.: But in the best scholarly sense the system of explanation which he generates, I believe in XXVI when he begins talking of the Mind/Texture/Determinatives, is a system of his need to articulate what the seals articulate. Now as that system expresses itself is that part of his need to apprehend, or is it that part of the thing's need to be expressed?

Schwerner: What's interesting to me in that question is that it implies a question about the nature of ego. When you're talking apprehending, according to the Buddhist formulation of the activity of ego—which is an irrevocably necessary aspect of early human development. Trungpa Rinpoche once said to me (while we were having a talk about whether it would be possible with the ideal education to somehow do an end run around this distorting busy monkey of the mind, which is what the teachings refer to when they talk about ego), he said: No it isn't possible. You can't do an end run around it; you simply have to submit to the fact that there is this busy monkey of the mind constantly apprehending, distorting, doing its kind of psychic gesticulations and impositions on the world and that later after that even if you receive at the age of one, say, extraordinary teaching from a specially chosen incarnate lama, only after that, whenever, six, seven, eight, later years, can you start to undo the mind-coverings and the

distortions that come ineluctably with human development.

W.G.: Which strikes me as maybe analogous and parallel to something I've argued elsewhere relative to the Aztec use of language, that language itself will always necessarily impose an ironic distance between articulation and reality and the desire to apprehend is always necessarily defeated and always necessarily impossible, because there is irony, there is a distance of irony metaphorically imposed. Language can never be anything but metaphorical in its attempt to reach toward reality. And those who won't accept that distance are doomed to an expressive frustration.

Schwerner:....are doomed to illusion.

W.G.:....and illusion. Yes. There's the Aztec expression: *ayac nelli in tiquilhuia nican*, literally, "no one truth we speak here," that is, "no one here speaks the truth," which I understand to mean not that everybody lies, but that language by its fundamental nature, cannot express truth. Now what Rinpoche said, that you can't make an end run, would suggest something similar; you can't escape ego, nor can you grasp reality. And both of those are illusions.

Schwerner: To stay with the main line of the discussion: the reason I introduced the idea of ego into the conversation at the point that I did had to do with your earlier question, which I thought was really apposite, relating to a dual matter: one of them the thingness of the things themselves, calling for being.

W.G.:....that's right.

Schwerner:....and the recognizing presence of the seer or speaker or hearer, the relationship between the two...so that in a sense you're talking about a universe totally informed by being, by living, by dynamism, by vivacity, which is in a simplified sense what you find in the Romantics. That is to say Coleridge and Wordsworth and that family of experiencers had some...their desires had some relationship to what we're talking about, but they were almost explicitly dualistic and grounded in a sort of theistic Christianity, whereas I think the SIT has glimpses of the idea that there might be another way of experiencing these complex bifurcations and he doesn't quite know how or why, but he knows that somehow these matters are at the root of the human quandaries as revealed by the earliest historical processes.

W.G.: So that as cosmologists might say, to grasp the first few milliseconds of the universe or of history, as it were, would also be to grasp the essence of the world as it still enacts itself before us. Some linguists have had a sniff of that-which is why they can be such intolerant theologians.

Schwerner: In other words the S/T's crazy to want to find that big bang, as it were, which represents, which relates to the implosive and/or explosive beginnings of language, of expressive symbolization for the human person. So that's a kind of insanity, and yet it seems to me that it's a kind of insanity, if that's what it is, which is characteristic of some of the most interesting minds of our period, of the post-Cartesian period.

W.G.: Which suggests to me a couple of the things that Paul Christensen said about the Tablets in his article on ethnopoetics in Parnassus, in which he talks about the Tablets as working towards a destruction of the ego in the literary act and "the Tablets is increasingly important because it is invisible, one of the more starkly demonstrated instances of trading in ego for ethnos in the making of literature. Its depersonalization of language and imagination produces a sense of community and of a crowded human past." This is a very perceptive comment, the finest discussion of the Tablets that I'm aware of. But I'm wondering about the notion of ethnos as an operative alternative to ego. Is it a tribal sensibility that is the other option? Or what is an ethnos as a consciousness? What

is a tribal sensibility as an alternative to ego? Or is there an other alternative that will replace ego or that may be available to something beyond ego as an expressive stance?

Schwerner: I don't think that question interests me. I think it's the kind of theory-driven dualistic speculation in connection with which both terms are simply representatives of vectors in the floating space of the Tablets, which never, by definition, become resolved and in which neither ever conquers more space than the other. In the sense that these might be two antithetical lines of force which characterize the dynamic ground of the Tablets, I would say OK, yes, that it was a relevant supposition, But the antithetical aspects of other variables are also visible in the Tablets. That is to say the relationship between what is usually called prose and what is usually called poetry.

And one of my interests in the poem, because I call the entire thing poem, relates to a sense that maybe what is really going on exists in the mysterious interstices between prose-prose and poem-poem or poem-prose and prose-poem or icon and poem and so forth and also the problem of translation, which means the thereness of the thing or the not-thereness of thin I think the problem with formulations of the kind which your question might elicit has to do with the dangerous solidification that aspects of ethnopoetics have occasionally fallen into.

W.G.: Your effort to generate a landscape of alternative expressive stances that escape from the dualistic subject/object in ego-located places is not necessarily part of a particularly ethnopoetic activity. From what you've just described, the Tablets seems wide-ranging in its effort to combine some sense of awareness of a present relationship to things and to the world in terms of metaphorical/historical discovery which stands off there at a distance, yet is a way of immediate apprehension: the SIT is caught in the middle of a dilemma.

In his work he reaches toward the most distant in order to understand the most immediate of himself. He wants to apprehend. What are the S/T's scholarly intention and ideal? What does he wish to accomplish in his work with the cylinder-seals in Tablet XXVII?

Schwerner: So I'm entertaining two questions now. One is about ethnopoetics and the other one has to do with the intentions of the S/T. I think that the question about ethnopoetics bumps into one of the attendant problems which always obtrudes in conversations which relate to names of schools. I suppose if you talk about impressionism or analytical cubism or dadaism you can talk on a certain level about some conceptual grids; on the other hand if you talk about Philippe Souppault or Tristan Tzara or Monet, you're talking about impressionism or dada only if you reduce your experience of those three men's works in the same way that illustrations in books of poetry tend to two-dimensionalize and subvert the immediate complexity of the poems.

So all programs, ethnopoetics as well as any other, since it's terminology, mere terminology, which historians need and attach themselves to because that's the level of that activity in the culture—ethnopoetics then as a term, as a useful pointer to certain apparent directions having to do with certain aspects of certain hungers...but that's about where that is so you know if you look specifically at the work of let's say Rothenberg or Tarn or a number of other poets who seem to be working in this area, or even maybe Gary Snyder, ultimately the subsuming term is not what seems to be very relevant and you're left with the particulars of a temperament as embodied in a work. The other question you asked, about the S/T's intentions...

W.G.: More his scholarly goal...

Schwerner: Goals. It's interesting that I said "intentions," because when you said "goals," I thought at the same time of intentions. His intentions are hidden from himself in the same way as one discovers in psychoanalytic psychotherapy one's intentions, hidden from one's conscious awareness. So his goals seem relatively

straightforward and they are less interesting than his intentions.

W.G.: But they are the part of his work...is it strictly a matter of translating the cylinder seals for instance and are all of these other complexities attendant upon that goal?

Schwerner: You're now talking specifically about Tablet XXVII?

W.G.: Yes.

Schwerner: Well, his goal in that particular Tablet is in a certain historical sense a little bizarre. That is, he says that this is the only historical evidence for a narrative structure findable in a series of cylinder-seals. On the face of it, that seems to me a little weird. No matter how closely you read that Tablet, it's very difficult to find a rationale for this assumption. I don't know where he comes by it. He tries to validate it scientifically by saying that things were found on the same level, in the same strata and so, but it seems to me a bit strange...it almost appears that his intention relates to an investment in narrative. Now why that should be so is not clear to me.

W.G.: In his effort to find this narrative, and in his creation then of the scholarly qualities of Body-Declensions which modify a reader's relation to and thus his experience of an utterance (for instance:

(symbol omitted) standing (symbol omitted) crouched

(symbol omitted) crouched sick

(symbol omitted) crouched shutting

(symbol omitted) crouched dying) and the early language-system's Entrance-Exodus-Vibrations (EEV's), denoted by various Torques of Separativeness, which themselves undergo semantic alteration (for instance:

(symbols omitted), of an each EEV mode specifying the nearness of an utterance to the extreme of either Song or a kind of Sprechstimme), and the Torques themselves of course...

Schwerner: What do you mean by "his efforts," and "his creation"?

W.G.: He is discovering in the work, in the seals, in the new language of the seals, these qualities which have to be taken into consideration in creating a translation. Right?

Schwerner: It seems so.

W.G.: You wouldn't say that you have the same reservation about those as you would about his finding of a narrative? Is he equally or less reliable in his discovery of these characteristics of the text than he is in his discovery of a narrative, which seems to be somewhat tenuous? Schwerner: I can't even relate to that question.

W.G.: [cracks up...]

Schwerner: I think that his formulation of this language... means after all...he says that there are two variables here which are unprecedented. One of them relates to the narrative continuity to be found in a number of seals, and the other one relates to the unexampled texture of the language of the seals, which is a combination of pictographic

and cuneiform modes which are ordinarily separated by many hundreds of years. So it's hard for me to think that observation number one would be more or less convincing than observation number two.

W.G.: Let me abandon that. Although there are more questions that I want to ask about the specifics of the relationship between the Torques of Separativeness and Utterance/Texture/Indicators (U/T/I's). Now the Torques of Separativeness, and this is just a request for information, as he understands and I think 'discover' is the right word, he discovers these things in the text as he deciphers them.

Schwerner: Well he's a kind of linguistic anthropologist who is discovering categories, grammatical, experiential, categories embodied in language.

W.G.: OK. Now. This is just a linguistic question then.

Schwerner: And he finds experiential grammatical categories embodied in language at a historical point where ordinarily one would not have done so. That is to say, in terms of the evolution of language in this culture he is discovering a kind of self-awareness in the linguistic complexity in which ordinarily historians of language have not found it.

W.G.: Do these Torques of Separativeness (symbols omitted) apply across the range of Utterance/Texture/Indicators? Or do I misunderstand the linguistics?

Schwerner: You have now fallen into his universe of discourse.

W.G.: Exactly.

Schwerner: That is to say...

W.G.: I'm attempting to decipher his universe of discourse. Schwerner: You're asking a straight scientific question, given his definition of scientific categories. That is, you're saying, if I understand you correctly, you're asking whether the Torque of Separativeness as a grammatical, as an embodied aspect of this new language, whether it is subsumed under the rubric of Utterance/Texture/Indicator, or whether it is subsumed under the rubric of the earlier kind of...

W.G.: Mind/Texture/Determinative.

Schwerner: Mind/Texture/Determinative.

W.G.: Which is another question, the relationship between...

Schwerner: The M/T/D's and the U/T/I's.

W.G.: These questions we have to put to the SIT directly.

Schwerner: I can't usefully comment on that, because I find that he speaks so much about it and it seems to be so clear at the same time that there's a certain kind of confusion at the edges of both definitions, that I'm not sure. It makes enough sense to be problematic, I would say.

W.G.: Referring to the work of Schmandt-Besserat, you said that you had discovered her work five or six years ago after working on Tablet XXV. I'm interested in knowing farther back, in the very origins of the Tablets themselves as a concept, what books and what studies, number one, suggested this tack to you originally and, number two, what works did you ransack or search or use in the generation of the earlier Tablets before the work of Schmandt-Besserat? And I'm thinking here more just of specific academic things that you might have used...

Schwerner: Within the last five years or so I've studied, among others, Rudolph Arnheim on vision and gestalt, Jack Goody on change and traditionalist societies, Eric Havelock on orality into literacy, Cyrus Gordon on forgotten scripts, G.S. Driver on writing systems.... But my response to your question does not involve a relation to an academic context in the beginning, the early days of the formulation and production of the Tablets in the middle sixties. That is, the history of Yehudi Menuhin suggests some sort of parallel which occasionally haunts me and at the same time is really representative of the growth or evolution or nature of an artist's development. I was very struck years ago when I read that Menuhin in his childhood and in his early adolescence was a violinist whose musicianship came from him as it were almost the way sap comes out of a limb, or courses through a limb, a tree, a bush. It was in his late adolescence that he decided or his teacher decided or somehow a decision was made that he had to rededicate himself to the study of violin playing in a way which he had not done before. I don't remember why this was true. So that he became a slightly different kind of violinist.

And I remember being upset by the idea that you couldn't go on your early capital. That somehow there was some sort of implicit law in personal development which required that you had to go beyond your intuitive, instinctual sensibility and that you had to attain the attributes of otherness in order to get on with it.

And I think that's a little bit what seems to me to have happened with the Tablets. It has a little bit to do with innocence, experience; it has a little bit to do with reflexivity; it has a little bit to do with one's relationship to otherness. The earlier Tablets came not from a reasoned plan, not from a theoretical and rational construct as much as they did from a kind of hunger...or a disappointment or an irritation akin to the quality of the in an image I have used in this connection-of a pig looking for truffles, simply rooting about.

The rationalizations and the justifications and the historical parallels and antecedents were increasingly almost a surprise to me in the same way that I discovered only maybe ten years ago, which seems extraordinary to me now, the fact that in the universities, all these years that I was privately doing these poems, people were starting to do all kinds of work called deconstruction, structuralist criticism and phenomenological speculations, maybe fifteen years ago or so. I never really got involved in any of that. It never impinged on me.

W.G.: But did you not...forget the critical schools and critical systems ...did you not make any effort to be familiar with any of the actual scholarship of Sumerian, Babylonian, and Akkadian studies?

Schwerner: Yes, I did. Later, as I just mentioned. But the way it happened is an evidence of the texture of my intentions at the time. I suppose it's a little much to say that one's embodiments are based on accident, and I don't want to push it too far. But when I was at Columbia, and as far back as when I was working in the Columbia library at Butler, in the stacks, as an undergraduate, one of the floors contained Samuel Noah Kramer's transliterations of Sumerian materials and one of them happened to be a big book, lying open on a shelf in literally a dusty part of the back of the floor, the rear of that floor in the stacks of the Butler library.

If I've ever had an epiphanic experience in my life connected to what I've done, that was it. And it was in a sense unmediated. That is to say, I felt it as iconically and unmediatedly insistent and present.

W.G.: You don't remember which book?

Schwerner: No. No. I don't.

W.G.: Why "insistent"? What was insistent about it?

Schwerner: It responded to I guess an internal urgency which found the possibility of some accidental form. And maybe in that kind of discovery situation there might be some roots of connection with the Scholar/Translator's desire to narrow the distance between apprehension and thingness. But of course this is merely speculation.

W.G.: Well, you wouldn't want to suggest in your Menuhin analogy that the S/T has a fundamentally Keatsian relationship to his art? As Keats said, "if poetry comes not as natural as leaves to a tree, it better not come at all." We're not dealing with a romantic consciousness quite as effusive or as unself-conscious as that, are we?

Schwerner: I don't know.

W.G.: Of course a great deal can be said for the self-consciousness of Keats.

Schwerner: I mean Keats may have said that at one point, but he had a pretty powerful retrospective speculative capability as he shows in his letters to his brother and other people. So that's only one attribute of his complex character.

W.G.: But the antagonism that you indicate the SIT may feel toward necessity of retraining as it were, or relearning an art which one already knows...

Schwerner: I wasn't implying at all that he felt it. I was saying that I did.

W.G.:...that you felt it.

Schwerner: That I've been feeling it.

W.G.: But that's a very Keatsian antagonism is it not? That desire or belief or conviction that the art is there full-blown, complete, entire, available, and needs no further rehearsing.

Schwerner: No. I don't believe that.

W.G.: I didn't think so.

Schwerner: I don't think that at all. I think what...I don't even know how interesting this is, because it's in the realm of intention, or artistic intention and you know, one never knows, the whole deconstructive enterprise is significantly based on the irrevocable plasticity and diffuseness of intentionality.

W.G.: Well, it seems surprising to me that work which is so ego-antagonistic and so...

Schwerner:...you can't say ego-antagonistic...excuse me, but I think if you say ego-antagonistic you're saying ego-concerned, because it's simply the opposite and the opposite is the same as the original term. So I wouldn't put it exactly that way, and I don't think Christensen would put it exactly that way.

W.G.: So let's say then: so much desirous of finding stances beyond the traditional ego stances...

Schwerner: I wouldn't put it that way either. I think the word "stance" immediately predetermines the matter as well. The problem is that there's almost no noun, or verb for that matter, I suppose, and this is in fact interesting, there is almost no noun, or there is no noun or verb which can usefully incarnate the kinds of floating iconic universe, dynamic, which you're driving at, which you're interested in, which you're finding yourself in or pointing towards and so on. I mean I think a lot of contemporary poetry is deeply invested in the nature of this terrain and I think a lot of speculation about technique, about the nature of the line, about the nature of syntax, and about the nature of semantics relates to a profound life-concern with Being and not-Being and just as a general observation in terms of the terrain, somebody quoted Ed Dorn to me as saying, and if I got it right, I thought it was an intelligent comment, that you can't undo meaning by messing about with syntax.

There's a general desire about in the terrain of poetry, not only in poetry, but art in general, poiein, "makings; to make" which has to do with a greed, a greed to undo in order to refind. The attendant problem is that at the same time it is necessary and unquestionably necessary to humble oneself before the fact that one cannot leap out of one's own condition. My dear friend Michael Heller lays claims, rightly I think, to the first utterance of that apothegm. Or by undoing syntax, in a language which is syntactically vectored, by undoing syntax to think or feel that one can somehow so dislocate semantics as to blunder upon a brave new world.

There is no brave new world. There is at best the presentation of a many-verse in which contending lines of force operate whether randomly or not, but I'm not interested in a kind of Jackson MacLovian series of random or semi-random strikes. It's much more interesting to me to create, to repeat what I think I've said before, what Olson, I think it was, called a high-energy product bearing the signs of my handicraft which nevertheless include within it the kinds of open-work, psychic open-work, which allow the reader to fall into the holes again and again.

W.G.: So that the exercise, the enterprise of the S/T to find the oldest world is maybe the way beyond mucking about in syntax, that what can't be redone in order to be renewed can only be redone, or may be redone by pursuing to some origins; there is no brave new world, but maybe there is an original world...

Schwerner: The S/T may think so, but to the degree that he thinks so, he's responsible, foolishly, for looking for a brave old world, and looking for a brave old world is the same delusion as looking for a brave new world, because neither exists, and I suppose it is one of the concerns of the Tablets as a texture and a structure to constantly veer away from the suggestion that either is true. And thus it exists in a kind of impalpable stream which may account for the rather idiosyncratic critical history of its existence for the last quarter century.

W.G.: So you have no faith in the S/T's ability to find a tablet or find a role which is going to show him, or in which he will discover the original nexus between expression and the thin? Schwerner: When physicists are present at a resurrection, he will do so.

G.: [Ongoing laughter] Shut it off. I don't know where to go from here. In Tablet XXVII, in the lengthy prose confessional description/ commentary that the S/T provides in describing the nine cylinder-seals, a number of things are said that would seem to be useful in some context other than his own very specific translation context, and some assumptions he exposes about the nature of his work and the nature of his ideas about language and his ideas of the ur-Aryan's ideas about language may be interesting to someone other than simply the S/T himself. There are spaces in the S/T's discussion where he is momentarily lucid and even perhaps apprehensible.

Schwerner: You mean he's usually off the wall?

W.G.: He's usually quite strange.

Schwerner: I don't know what "strange" means.

W.G.: Well he's in a world of apprehension, which is marvelous and detailed and highly personal.

Schwerner: You think he's lying?

W.G.: I wouldn't say he's lying; I think he's enjoying himself; no he's definitely not lying and definitely not misleading himself. Schwerner: I think it's sort of important to have a sense of where this "strangeness" lies.

W.G.: Well, the description which he provides of the language and its system, which he is translating, is not apprehensible to me.

Schwerner: Because?

W.G.: Because of course I don't have the necessary original materials that he's working on, as any serious translator knows... Schwerner: Again you've been seduced into his universe.... Actually you do have the original.

W.G.: I have much of the original.

Schwerner: A virtue of XXVII is that he provides the original.

W.G.: I was aware that he provides. I wasn't sure if that was the totality of the nine seals. Do we have the totality of the original cylinder-seals?

Schwerner: Which the S/T says comprise one Tablet. The strangeness of that is that he thinks these nine cylinder-seals comprise one essential narrative.

W.G.: He points that out and he points out the uniqueness of that as compared to the structure of other Tablets.

Schwerner: Very bizarre sequence, XXVII. It's unique in comparison to other cylinder-seals, is what I think he says. We want to be careful.

W.G.: Of course. He's an extremely careful man, and we want to respect that care. However he seems to be rather uncertain himself whether his apprehension of narrative is valid. He's not altogether sure.

Schwerner: He's a decent man. It's an honest doubt.

W.G.: It's also called responsible translation. Of course the question is what is he finally responsible to. But it seems to me to be unanswerable and I won't pursue it. But I think through this struggle which he carries on with the characters and the marking of his cylinder-seals, he makes some statements on occasion that I'd like to explore a little bit, or at least seek out your opinion about and see if you might be able to enlighten me a bit as to what you believe he's thinking, For example, statements like this, which he inserts almost offhandedly in his scholarly description ...he says, in parenthesis: "A major problem of course is that following Kant we understand

that it is precisely impedimenta to clear seeing of a thing-as-such which linguistic forms as reflectors of consciousness commonly embody; rather than a ame of who or what do you trust it seems to be a question of what. is real, not evaluation but flat-out thereness."

Well if in fact he seems to be of the opinion that linguistic forms are themselves by their very definition impedimenta as much as they are reflectors, what kind of poetry can he possibly imagine could be at the source of his cylinders; obviously, built into the very agency of expression is an impediment to expression. Is that where he seems to be following Kant? Or am I misapprehending both the translator and Kant? I'm not interested in Kant; I'm interested in the S/T's apprehension.

Schwerner: It seems that one of the repeated in-and-out themes in the weave of this tablet, XXVII, has to do with a desire and a desperation having to do with unity of thing and sign. And he seems incredibly drawn to this unity as an essential pole of all his thought. He's driven to this almost monomaniacal need for unitary experience, or identification, and his trouble is that he is a scientist of the kind which posits the observer as integrally other than the observed. But he has intuitions that maybe there are other ways of experiencing these matters.

That's what I see as some of the drama of his endless excurses and his speculations, not so much that he may be right or wrong in particular cases, but that he has this terrible consuming hunger for the real, the kind of thing that you see in Wallace Stevens's last book, *The Rock*. And he cannot deal with it directly, so he alludes to the problems in somewhat tortured sentences, which nevertheless make clear that he's beset by the demons of duality. But he doesn't know ho to formulate his essential problem. Say he's somewhere between a slightly renegade monotheist and a putative crypto-Buddhist.

W.G.: He poses that very suggestive offhand question to himself at one point when he says, "Are the vastnesses of linguistic operations Buddhist?"

Schwerner: That's a remarkable thing for him to say. He doesn't get into that sort of thing too much.

W.G.: Does the S/T belong in a kind of U.C. at Santa Cruz program of the history of consciousness?

Schwerner: In this connection, Paul Christensen writes something useful about the work in his essay. My intention, that is my, the writer's, intention, one of my intentions in this sequence of pieces, which comprise 'poetry' and 'prose' and computer-generated graphics, as we usually define them based on justified margins and observable lineaments, my intention, as Christensen sees it, has to do with what he calls the destruction of ego in the literary act. Now this is not a recognizably common Western literary aim.

W.G.: Quite the opposite since the Romantic period at least.

Schwerner: Yes. With the overt exception of those mystical Christians who are the luxury of the tradition, and who in some cases were made to pay dearly. With the exception of some of them, like Meister Eckhart, who earned a place in what is called literary achievement as well, or Saint Teresa, say, who lopped over from the dualism of Christianity into some unitary realm which was almost inexpressible...but aside from that, and I think before Romanticism certainly, if you take the Enlightenment, or if you take Renaissance poetry and so forth, the aim of the Western writer does not entertain the desire for or the assumption of the usefulness and the correctness and appropriateness, essential rightness, of the destruction of ego in the literary act.

Aside from the mixture of genres, or sub-genres, aside from the fact of multiple voicings, which Christensen calls

"plurilogue," and which Arthur Sabatini in his doctoral dissertation on my work refers to in a Bakhtinian sense as "dialogue," as the essential mode of the work, there is an ongoing desire to self-destruct while at the same time keeping integral a kind of presence.

Now this kind of paradox is like dancing in the point of a pin approximately a micron in diameter. Christensen talks about "...the pastiche or the self-abnegating generality of some of the multiphasic so-called statements...that is the tablet is the unit of measure in a mythological event." And he talks about Charles Olson as a representative of some of the best of contemporary mythopoetic constructions and imagination and he says Olson would have found this self-abnegating generality unbearable to sustain. "The hovering asterisks, plusses, brackets and ellipses thwart the development of an individual voice and drive the text back into its mosaic mode of multiple voices, the plurilogue. If critics seem at times reluctant to praise Schwerner for these qualities of his writing and concentrate instead on the so-called content of poems, it is likely a reluctance to join him in the enterprise which is the destruction of ego in the literary act. This, he says, is where I have pitched my tent."

W.G.: "Love has pitched his mansion in the place of excrement..."

Schwerner: Totality. You know, in the sixties, I wanted not to juxtapose pieces of the past with each other or certain kinds of high modernist effects, as the "Wasteland" and the Cantos tend to do successfully and powerfully and imaginatively and beautifully; I wanted to make the past. So that there would be no fulminating ego busy ransacking the attic or the cellar or the storehouse or the armada. Everything would be in a certain sense co-equal in its non-being, because it would all be invented even though some of the sources clearly had to do with what we call history.

W.: Perhaps we could examine the S/T's synoptic translation of the nine cylinder-seals at the end of Tablet XXVII. It seems to me that this final poem in fact encapsulates and summarizes most of the issues that the 5/T has been raising and struggling with all the way through his commentaries, the effort to comprehend the complex interrelationships between image and meaning, pictograph and cuneiform, Determinative and interpretation.

Schwerner: Maybe you could read that, because whoever is going to read this probably won't have the work in front of him.

W.G.:

...let's say arrive through the blind artificer's ferreting hands to the corrugated soil or the worm-rich lapsus-loan there are fingers treating of ridges treating there they palpate fractures premature calcifications the dawn light's cries of the rough edges of designing vocables and who

sees?

eye

from an eye the seeking rainbow-cords link to the object; not-two, it's the sentence of the eater sitting in the court of surprise

W.G.:...the seeing which breaks down the barrier between subject and object. There is no subject and object. The eye, "...seeking rainbow cords link to the object, not-two...." But then comes the problem of oral expression. How does the oral succumb to the priority of the eye?

...or that this tongue arrive for the sour and sweet macerated word-mash cave-shrimp blind taste crust of the common denotation

the eye!

the cadence of the eye! the sought, seduced appropriating traveler in the two of one place, seducible through an apparent end of separation

W.G.:...the character on the cylinder-seal is a cadence of the eye.

Schwerner: "Apparent end of separation." That's his adjective, right?

W.G.: But of course it's the original speaker's adjective. Schwerner: Supposedly.

W.G.:...that the translator finds.

Schwerner: Except that you can never tell because all you've got is a bunch of pictures. It's again a game of Who do you trust?

W.G.: And then we have the question of the voices:

...voices!

look, see them

and we see the voices:

look, see them in the azury center

falling-

or that the nostrils be guiltless of seeking

meditating

nostrils no flare of nostrils

scow-stink hyacinthine odors of utterance-shards

so that even the nostrils are involved in this apprehension of expression, of voices which come to us through the eye:

...or that through hammer stirrups anvil in

surface-rising edged and common sound-bond a transfer is being taken on

But how is that "being taken on," except through the eye, so that the ear's activity has been performed through an act of imagination via the eye?

Schwerner: But there is an imponderable paradox which underlies all this, because, for instance, Father Ong, again, in *Orality and Literacy*, talks about the way in which the visual sense tends to separate, and the way the auditory sense makes possible a psychic collectivity. So you've got the antithetical sense raised constantly by the statements in the final poem in XXVII, and there are echoes of that antithetical position floating in and out of a number of the recent Tablets.

So you've got in this area too the human sensorium and its relationship to unitary experience because almost all of the sensorium is evoked in that poem. You've got sensorium as vectors, each having a voice as it were. And you're constantly doing and undoing, doing and undoing and the idea then that one, in a sense, gets from this is that there is no place to stand, from which one can observe anything else. I remember a line of George Oppen's inscribed on the back of T-shirts being worn at the National Poetry Conference recently in Maine, something to the effect that the real mystery rests in the fact that there is a place to stand at all. There isn't.

W.G.: And yet the oral would seem to have some call to priority in that sensorium because it's after that sense that we can say: so this world is the one

and that the oral sense unifies that preception...

Schwerner: the oral and the auditory

W.G.:...unify that perception. And it then, the world, that one world constitutes our food language-food we eat and we are translatable so that finally we come to this cannibalistic: conclusion in which through our sensorium we consume the world.

Schwerner: The Scholar/Translator talks in either this Tablet or the XXVIth about the nature of Tibetan meditations in which visualizations which are used as a means finally end up at a state of Emptiness, in which the images will have been part of the travel to the final experience of Emptiness. It seems to me in a way that that's what the SIT is paralleling in his poem. And he ascribes this kind of complex, interpenetrative subjective/objective unitariness to a civilization which we read in Thorkild Jacobsen or we read in Samuel Noah Kramer is a civilization almost relentlessly objectifying its gods and its natural forces as relationship to otherness. So there are a lot of bizarre antithetical and paradoxical problems here, on a number of different levels.

W.G.: Why do we end with a "bloody loin"? That the world is finally a "bloody loin of soul like them" and I'm not sure who "them" are.

so this world is the one it constitutes our food language-food we eat and we are translatable let's say equidistant from every point or we are a bloody loin of soul like them that's all right language-cannibal bait

"That's all right language-cannibal bait": he says finally.

Schwerner: That may be part of what he does a great deal, which is to manufacture indissolubly concrete and abstract combinations in images so that you can't pin the tail on either one of those donkeys.

W.G.: In the commentary, the SIT makes another statement at one point, about a misperception that we have

relative to the modern world, and it strikes me as another one of those asides he occasionally makes, a kind of wisdom that spins out of his struggle and which he offhandedly tosses us, as it were, a sense of consciousness of his own present circumstance, in the modern world. He's speaking about the U/T/I's, the Utterance/Texture/Indicators.

Schwerner: Which is one of the Determinatives which he discovers in this idiosyncratic language of the cylinder-seals.

W.G.:...he's talking about the connection between performance and relationship in the U/T/I's, which is not a reification, he says "of an isolation threatening to enshroud a solitary reader faced with a text." And then, I take this up again, he comments: "Although we generally conceive of that reader as separated from the dance and music ordinarily associated with archaic and tribal modes of poetry, it's a common and insistent mistake to envision the post-archaic world as the site of increasing numbers of civilized sad troglodytes existing in a hell of separation and loss. The rites and poetry, music, dance, didn't end; they entered mind." Now it strikes me that this is a particularly modern observation he's able to make as a result of his struggle with the archaic

Schwerner: He's emphasizing the present conviction about subjectivity and it sometimes seems as if he's trying awfully hard to inject the texture of a modern sense of subjectivity into proto-archaic materials. But he seems to have the goods.

W.G.: Did poetry, music, dance, enter mind, in your opinion?

Schwerner: There's a Zen story, in which the neophyte asks the master: Why after nine years have I been unable to experience satori? And the master points to a little freshet in the ground, some twenty yards away from where they're standing, and he says, pointing to the freshet, "See, there you may enter; I have left nothing out."

W.G.: I find the most interesting parts of what the SIT does to be commentaries on his own labor.

Schwerner: Well, he has three generally identifiable self-presentations in the last two Tablets and in the one I'm working on now. That is, the subtitles of the late Tablets are: "Laboratory-Teachings- Memoirs of the Scholar/Translator." So what we're talking about now is your bent towards the Memoirs aspect of the SIT. His overt bent is toward the Laboratory aspect. And he is seized almost it appears in spite of himself by the Teachings aspect of his own preaching, which he would I think disallow immediately. In this sense I think that I'm interested in high modernism brought up to date as opposed to a commitment to the hopelessness of a search for meaning.

The SIT has an inclination towards meaning, but he's got a problem which he avows covertly and indirectly and with pain. He has a suspicion that his inclination towards meaning must find other paths from those he has been given by his own modes of scholarship and research, his own culture, his own theological antecedents. And that's the main problem; that's also the problem of Western civilization, and this is the kidney or liver or pancreas of the often confused hullabaloo about multiculturalism.

As I said, he sometimes seems to suggest that everything between Heraclitus and Heidegger is off the wall. He never uses that kind of phrase, but it's my reading that suggests that he occasionally has these intuitions, but it's very difficult for him to simply get out there with such tentative speculations.

W.G.: He hopes to find a way in order to translate effectively and in order to find voice for the images of the eye.

Schwerner: It's a mess.

W.G.: Now, what about the comments you made earlier concerning the overall structure and design of the Tablets as you have projected such a design in your own mind. You've given me this outline relative to the Masoretic text of the Old Testament, in which Genesis would begin with Tablet XXVI, or Tablet XXVI would begin with Genesis.

Schwerner: In which Genesis and Tablet XXVI relate to each other.

W.G.: And so that, as of now, you've completed through Tablet XXVII, relating to Exodus, and you project...

Schwerner: I'm at work on Leviticus, XXVIII.

W.G.:....and you project another twenty-one Tablets...

Schwerner: Until we get to number XLIX, which theoretically might end the series, which I had originally thought would only end with my death. So I have a somewhat mixed feeling about this tentative structure. So about this business of forty-nine Tablets—including the books of the Masoretic version in chronological order—I suppose that what I was saying to myself was that it was possible to play the game a little nearer home at this point, not that near, a little nearer.

W.G.: But certainly you're not suggesting anything as obvious as Joyce's parallel structures with the Odyssey in Ulysses.

Schwerner: I think Joyce played fast and loose with a lot of that.

W.G.: He played very fast and loose, but at the same time he is able to make very specific kinds of textural associations.

Schwerner: It's useful. It helps in contextual terms. It's like getting suggestions from a rich proliferating matrix and you can play it so many different ways. So you both have and desist from having, which is a nice place to be.

W.G.: Thank you.

Schwerner: Thank you.

Willard Gingerich has published translations and discussions of pre-Columbian Nahuatl literature and contemporary Chicano and Native-American writers. His most recent work is *The Flayed God*, edited by P. and R. Markman, published by HarperCollins in 1993. He has also published a chapbook, *Tamoanchan*.

DETAILS

Subject:	Writers; Poetry
People:	Schwerner, Armand

Publication title:	The American Poetry Review; Philadelphia
Volume:	24
Issue:	5
Pages:	27
Publication year:	1995
Publication date:	Sep 1995
Publisher:	World Poetry, Incorporated
Place of publication:	Philadelphia
Country of publication:	United States, Philadelphia
Publication subject:	Literature--Poetry
ISSN:	03603709
Source type:	Magazines
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	Interview
Accession number:	02502416
ProQuest document ID:	220631210
Document URL:	http://ezproxy.montclair.edu:2048/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/220631210?accountid=12536
Copyright:	Copyright World Poetry, Incorporated Sep 1995
Last updated:	2017-11-10
Database:	ProQuest Central

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